CONTENT WARNINGS

*Emotional Abuse

*Insects

*Body horror

*Death

*Brief mentions of nausea

[Theme music: “Some Spooky Sh*t Is Going On Here” by Theo Goodwin]

INTRO

The Underwood Collection is a derivative, non-canonical, fan-made project derived from The Magnus Archives, an original horror podcast which is created and distributed by Rusty Quill Ltd. The Underwood Collection is not endorsed by Rusty Quill and is distributed under a Creative Commons, attribution, non-commercial sharealike 4.0 international license. For more information about the original source material, visit www.RustyQuill.com/TheMagnusArchives.

The Underwood Collection, Episode 19: Renovation

[Tape recorder clicks on. Static is heard throughout.]

ULYSSES

Adriene was lying. Of course Adriene was lying. That was a last-ditch effort, and it just proved what I already know. I can't trust her.

This is what I found—what Frank or someone left behind for me, I don't know. Either way it wanted to turn up. It's filthy, it reeks, and I'm tossing it out the minute I'm done with it. I'm just going to record it before it crumbles to maggots in my hand or something, God forbid.

Statement of Nestor Bell, regarding her "renovation." Original statement given 27th of March, 2016. Recording by UC Bamba, Head Curator of the Usher Foundation, Washington, D.C.

Statement begins.

When I was a child, I used to play with anthills. *[Long pause.]* Not in the way you might think, though. Others would do so savagely, crushing the carefully built mounds underfoot or drowning all the residents with a garden hose. I was nowhere near that level of barbarity. No, instead, I would lay a single finger atop the rounded sand and wait for one of the brave little creatures to venture onto the curve of my knuckle. I was always rewarded for my patience, for I thought that everyone received what they deserved in

due time. A bit naive, perhaps, but then I was a child at the time. I would grow to know better.

My life before was a simple one, uneventful for the most part. I lived in a quiet, relatively 'nice' neighborhood with my parents, and went to school while managing to fly under the radar of just about everyone. I was, in all senses of the word, unremarkable, at least in terms of my own perception. The most I ever heard about myself was that I was an odd duck who was more content to read about insects and escape into the woods at the edge of my neighborhood to climb trees and run my hands along the rough bark until my fingertips were raw. I was content with this perception of me, as well. I found the soil and the leaves and the ants that crawled over me more comforting than the arms of my own mother. I began to dream of becoming a dragonfly, or a wasp, or something winged and beautiful, something that could fly and fly before finally coming to die upon the ground, and become ravaged by ants and flies before returning to the dust I had come from. It was the sort of dream I never thought would be possible.

It was once I'd graduated and moved onto the famed release of college that my life finally began to shape into something, not worthwhile, but interesting at the least. It was a surprise to no one when I went into entomology. My parents weren't particularly kind, they had always teased me about this interest, and even went so far as to purchase a ceramic ant that 'reminded them of me'. It was covered in a dark red glaze that looked like blood, and

perhaps I was meant to be affronted by it, but instead, I grew to be fond of the little thing. It was a tangible reminder of what I loved, and so I loved it.

It should have been a happy time for me, and it was, at first. But that all changed when I met Joshua Lambden.

He was a fellow student of mine, and had a similar fascination with insects, though his passion was in butterflies. He would talk at length of pinning wings to wood, watching chrysalises hatch like some kind of alien larvae, and in turn, I could marvel at the elaborate structures that ants created, and their patterns of communication that rivaled our own social craft. I believed that he and I had some kind of intellectual connection, one that I struggled to find elsewhere in my life, and I was elated whenever he sought me out. I was so desperate for someone I thought understood me that I was determined to always be there when I was needed, and naturally fell over myself to say yes when he asked me on our first date.

It was pleasant, at first, as I think it always is for most people. Joshua was sweetly attentive in a way that I'd never really had before. He was reliable and hardworking and far more tolerant of my interest in insects than anyone else. Better yet, he actually understood what I was saying and could contribute, making it more than just a one-sided ramble. Since we had a decent relationship and both desired a decrease in living expenses, we decided to share his apartment. And so, everything seemed to be stable.

There is nothing wrong with routine, you must understand. A colony thrives on its routine, on every member following their roles and working together to ensure survival. But people are not ants, they are much worse. They do not care about each other. They will step on one another until the whole mound crumbles. There is no concept of true unity in the human society. Stability in the human sense is a façade, and the routine that comes with it is unbearable.

I began to despise coming back to the apartment. Though I had found Joshua's attention endearing at first, day after day of it became suffocating. He didn't understand that I didn't have the time or energy to reassure his insecurities, and would tighten his grasp every time I tried to extricate myself from it. It was as though I had been bound in a chrysalis of someone else's making, in this pretty little house with a pathetic little man, one that I could never escape from, always trapped. Always stagnant, like a pond surrounded by mosquitoes.

I began to retreat further into my studies: taking more classes, spending more time on experiments and such. This upset Joshua. I suppose he was jealous of how much time I devoted to it. Truthfully, I did appreciate the break it gave me from him, but the fact was that I was simply enamored with my research. It freed and educated me from everything else, and it was on something I loved, insects.

There were times though, when I had exhausted everything I could do in terms of working and still felt reluctant to return home. So instead, I would drive to the forest and take refuge in some old tree, reveling in the company of all the ants and worms and mites that lived there. I could stay there until it was dark, and then go back to a deeper darkness. I could step away from the responsibilities my life demanded and breathe, if only for a moment. It was a temporary fix, but would lead to something much more permanent. The thing about my life at the time was that it was unsustainable. I loved my research, but there was an element of separation that never truly gave me euphoria, and I always had to leave it and return to Joshua and his constant surveillance. There was a breaking point, as there always is, and when things broke for good, the sharpness of it surprised me, somehow.

We were arguing, Joshua and I. Already paranoid about my disloyalty, he would get suspicious of my male colleagues. I had recently been messaging a friend who had asked me for help concerning his research, and I agreed. I had no romantic feelings for him, but nothing could have convinced Joshua otherwise. He made his accusations, and I rebutted them as I always had, but my frustration overtook me. I told him that if I left him, it would be because of his own stubborn inability to trust me, and not a result of anything I had done. He was a fool, and I was sick of his childish antics. He slapped me, his palm cracking across my cheek. I wasn't expecting it. He wasn’t the type to do this sort of thing.

I fell, colliding with a decorative table where the ant sculpture my parents had bought me lay and knocking it over. Time seemed to slow as it wavered in midair before falling to the floor to join me. I watched the glaze and stone crack as the thorax shattered, and something in me broke with it.

Joshua immediately began to apologize profusely, or at least I think he did. All I could do was stay there, on the floor, staring at the shards of what had been my most prized possession, my source of comfort throughout this whole ordeal. It was only when he touched me to help me up that I snapped, shoving him away. He called my name a few times as I stumbled for the door, pausing only to grab my keys.

I don't remember the drive, really. I just remember slamming the door to my car and finding myself in the woods that I always escaped to before.

I ran to the nearest tree, and began to climb, the rough bark scraping my hands as I clawed at it, desperate to get away from the world in which I had trapped myself.

I was still crying, so I wasn't as careful as I should have been. My foot tried to push off of a trembling branch, and the moss-covered wood cracked underneath it. For a moment I was suspended, my hand outstretched in futile search of something to grasp, and then I fell, and the world turned upside down.

I wonder, even now, if that is what winged things feel like when they are flying: if they only feel as though they are falling with some modicum of

control over their direction. I had no such control. There was only gravity, the wind in my ears, a choked gasp in my throat—

And then the ground.

What happened next is something I desperately cling to every memory of, though some is regrettably lost in the pain. I remember lying there, my head twisted to the side, my cheek resting against cool dirt. I heard the wind rustling in the trees, watched as leaves gently drifted to the ground, uncaring of my situation, and I longed to rot with them and become food for the things I loved. Something else called out to me, though, in the haze akin to death, and then I realized. I realized everything I could be and the purposes I could serve, and I felt foolish for never having seen it before. But now, I was enlightened by the things that hide in the shadows, and I longed to be a part of them so much more than anything else.

The moment I thought it, the world around me began to crackle, as if I had answered an unspoken question. I tried to look around to the best of my ability, and at first I saw nothing. The longer I looked for the sound, however, I began to see dark shapes crawling over the leaves, and I realized that the crackling sound was the crunching of leaves as they folded under the weight of my loves coming to meet me. They came like a dark wave, a beautiful, writhing front of glittering dark bodies that washed over me, and I nearly wept in relief at the sensation.

I felt all of it, as they crawled into my mouth and lungs and ears. I felt them follow the flow of my blood along its many paths, felt them burrow into the insides of my bones and flesh. I heard them all sing as I welcomed them, an unending hymn that I could feel the vibrato of throughout my whole being. My darlings have never stopped singing to me, and had I not given them my voice I would sing for them as well. Instead, I pledged them the life they had given me, and sought to begin it all anew.

I returned to the place I once called home, and the moment the door opened and I stepped in, Joshua came in to meet me. There was perhaps an apology on his tongue, but it died at the sight of me. He stared at me, perhaps in horror. I smiled at him, and felt my darlings crawl from between my teeth as they begged to make a home in him. Who was I to deny them when they asked so sweetly for permission?

They quickly overwhelmed him, gleeful as they poured from me, and Joshua's cry was drowned out in their scrabbling for purchase. He stumbled back and fell, and my darlings swarmed him with ease. I watched, enraptured, as they dug into his flesh, his eyes, his tongue, filled with catharsis as my loves told me how it felt.

There was a cold anger in me as he screamed, though, a quiet fury that he did not fully understand how blessed he was to become such a communion. For a man who had engaged me in such talk of love, he had no appreciation

of the things that devoured him. It disgusted me, and made his death all the more satisfying.

When my darlings had gorged themselves, I welcomed them back with open arms. I felt cleansed, heightened. Joshua was gone, my parents were indifferent, and what point was there to continue my studies when I had ascended to something beyond research?

I left the apartment, Joshua's remains, and began my journey of the world that would never truly be ready for what I had become.

I have had many encounters, many demonstrations of my darlings' powers, all of them joyful in their own way. Spreading my wings has been ecstasy after ecstasy, and I cherish each time as if it was the first.

There were these exterminators, once. They had come to lay a tent over an old house. It was a beautiful house: roaming halls, hand-crafted woodwork. It was the kind of thing that the termites within thrived in, feasting on the flesh of a building long since abandoned. Or was abandoned. Someone had apparently taken interest in restoring it, rather than letting it rot and return to the soil it had rested upon. Disgusting. I went to it, lingered outside that garish covering; it made my darlings sick if I went inside.

There were some men sent to check on it, in their baggy uniforms and all. I remember them coming around the corner to find me waiting for them. One of them, barely a man with his wide, confused eyes, said I was putting myself in danger being so close to such poisons. I told him, as my darlings

flowed from me, that I was not the one who should be afraid. They didn't have their sprays to hide behind, you see, so my loves crawled inside their boots and chewed through the tendons in their heels as they tried to run. The house was out in the countryside, far away, so no one could hear them scream as they choked on the ants in their throats.

More were sent of course, and eventually the slugs in blue uniforms accompanied them. But they were all dealt with in similar fashions, and whoever had vested such interest in the house quickly lost it, and it was abandoned once more. That was one of my sweetest victories, I think. And it was all because of my loves.

My darlings have hollowed out all the parts of myself that I used to despise and filled in the gaps with themselves. The queen lives somewhere in the cavity of my chest, and I find it not unlikely that she has consumed what a doctor would have called my heart and replaced it with herself. Something beats there, or pulses, at any rate, and I have never felt more alive.

You, Ulysses, are perhaps one of the few living souls to ever have come so close to apotheosis as I have. Do you know how near you were to ascending? Do you have any idea how beautiful you could have become had you not been so damnably stubborn? You would have been turned into a masterpiece like me, and we could have been monuments, everlasting testaments to the ingenuity of my darlings...ah, well. It’s a shame that the

all-encompassing shadow has claimed you now, for you could have been a righteous beacon for us all.

Don't think that this means escape. My darlings will always be there, nestled in your desk drawer, hiding under the shelves...an ant on the wall, if you will. And you will carry on, doing your job and following your routine, wearily trudging along your path until your stubborn heart gives out, and you collapse. After all, you're only human, aren't you?

S—Statement ends.

Christ, I’m going to be sick—

[Tape clicks off.]

[Tape clicks back on.]

ULYSSES

Adriene, I’ve got no idea what your game is. I’ve got no idea what this is playing at. I don’t know what sort of sick joke you’re pulling.

This—this was aimed at me. This person knows about me. This is—this is personal.

And I don't know what to make of that, I—I don't know, but tomorrow…Tomorrow I hope I'll have answers about some of it. Any of it, really, I just want to be able to do something to deal with this.

[Beat.]

Is this a death threat? I— did I just receive a supernatural threat? Jesus. I hate this job.

That's a joke. *[Considering noises]* That's—sometimes a joke.

End recording.

*[Tape recorder clicks o*ff.]

[Theme plays.]

OUTRO

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